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:BC-HEALTH-PLEASURE
Health puritans accused of ruining quality of life
By Sue Pleming

BRUSSELS, Sept 24 (Reuter) - Puritanical health workers who dictate whether people should smoke or drink alcohol and coffee are trying to ruin the quality of life, a group of academics said on Friday.

The academics, grouped under the Associates for Research and Substance Enjoyment (ARISE), said an opinion poll found that coffee, tea, alcohol, cigarettes and chocolates were among the most cited products used by people to relax or cope with stress.

"Many of us hold the view that it is a person's right to enjoy these pleasures and we are very concerned about this puritanical movement against pleasure," said David Warburton, a professor of pharmacology at Reading University in England.

"People should be allowed to live a life of moderate hedonism."

The European Community, which has its headquarters in Brussels, was one of the main "puritanical bodies" dictating public health policy, the group said.

Warburton, who convened the two-day meeting entitled "Pleasure and Quality of Life", said the public was being duped by health surveys which often gave misleading information about the effect of smoking and alcohol.

"Much of health promotion is based on misinformation. It is politically driven," said Warburton, who has contributed to the U.S. Surgeon-General's report on the effect of smoking.

The MORI opinion poll, conducted in five European countries, found that 74 percent of Europeans drink coffee, 59 percent drink alcohol, 33 percent smoke, 56 percent eat chocolate and 54 percent drink tea.

"This means that all five categories of products of enjoyment play a large role in people's lifestyles," ARISE said in a statement accompanying the poll results.

Of the products examined, coffee was most frequently cited as a way of relaxing or coping with stress. For the same reason, 40 percent drank tea, 20 percent alcohol and 28 percent smoked.

"The relaxing effects of these products are an even more important factor for those who actuallly indulge," ARISE said.

When questioned about possible health risks, most Europeans felt they knew enough to make up their own minds, without public campaigns. For example 87 percent were aware of the health risks of tobacco while 86 percent knew the risks of alcohol.

Warburton said that in Japan, where health information was limited, less than two percent of 16-year-olds smoked. Yet in Sweden, where cigarette advertising was banned, 44 percent of 16-year-olds said they smoked.

The poll, which was commissioned by the academics, found that sex ranked only 10th among activities viewed as "typical pleasure" in daily life.

Just over 80 percent of Italians saw sex as a typical pleasure compared with 62 percent of Britons, the lowest rating in the countries surveyed.

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